

Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs; March 18, 2021

Committee Chair Pinsky and Honorable Delegates,

I am a high school senior in Montgomery County and represent Montgomery County Students on Climate Action, a student-led advocacy group committed to furthering local efforts to curb the climate crisis. I testify in fervent support of Delegate Solomon's HB0487, or the School Pedestrian Safety Act.

As a young person in this county, I strongly feel the urge to articulate my concerns for my safety and advocate for policies that reflect my desire for a sustainable future. More than 3,000 pedestrians are injured annually in the state of Maryland, with approximately 100 killed. It must be noted that our most susceptible population to traffic-related pedestrian accidents are those under the age of 15, especially those who walk or bike to and from school. These statistics are frightening considering that I could become one of the 100, despite taking all of the necessary safety precautions, on one of my next bike rides.

Equally upsetting, however, is the fact that these fatalities deter students and community members from making the smart and eco-friendly choice of biking or walking. Our pedestrian infrastructure is currently not designed to facilitate the transition from contributing to unnatural greenhouse gas emissions to engaging in sustainable personal decision-making. We cannot call for environmentally-conscious lifestyle changes in Montgomery County if we have not taken the mandatory steps to first ensure a sense of safety.

In addition to the Bill's requirements for county board's seeking state funding to construct new schools or add onto existing ones to submit pedestrian safety plans and for thorough reevaluation of existing infrastructure, the Bill will necessitate an analysis of hazardous walk zones for school students. There are many students who live within walkable distance of their closest school, but who are bused across major roads for the sake of safe travel. This is (1) easily fixable and (2) inherently unsustainable. If school walk zones are evaluated for pedestrian suitability, slight infrastructure changes can be made to augment walkability and minimize the need for nonessential busing.

It is important that school communities have an opportunity to express their concerns regarding the safety of school walk zones, for they are the most impacted and knowledgeable about potential/existing hazards. HB0487 requires that public input is documented and integrated into safety plans.

To reiterate, HBO487 creates a crucially important plan to ensure pedestrian safety and, by extension, the feasibility of environmental sustainability. Thank you for your time.

With passion and urgency,

Luca Utterwulghe (Co-Founder, MoCo Students on Climate Action)